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SUBJECT: Chavez Proclaims "I am the People" and Demands Absolute Loyalty

CLASSIFIED BY: Robin D. Meyer, Political Counselor, DOS, POL; REASON:  
1.4(B), (D)

11. (C) Summary: Pro-government and opposition groups each led large, peaceful demonstrations in Caracas on January 23 to commemorate the 52nd anniversary of the fall of the Marcos Perez Jimenez dictatorship. President Chavez joined thousands of his supporters bused in from across the country and proclaimed, "I demand absolute loyalty to my leadership because...I am the people and the people must be respected." The opposition highlighted the government's failure to provide dependable electricity, water and electricity, saying President Chavez had "struck out." It remains to be seen whether the growing social unrest will translate into political support for the opposition in the September legislative elections. End Summary.

Chavez: "I Am The People"

12. (SBU) Tens of thousands of people wearing the characteristic red of the Venezuelan Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) participated in the day-long pro-government march; many had been bused in from around the country. The peaceful, festive crowd carried banners expressing support for Chavez. Coverage by VTV, the government-controlled television channel, featured the tagline, "We Are Happiness, We Are the Majority" ("Somos Alegria, Somos Mayoria"). Chavez addressed the crowd late in the afternoon, emphasizing the need for unity in the upcoming National Assembly elections. He said, "If you are patriotic, you must be with Chavez . . . I demand absolute loyalty to my leadership because I am not me, I am the people, and the people must be respected! I must defend the people that I love." Demonstrators told the press they were there to support the President, with some noting that the country's electrical shortages were not a result of government inefficiencies but to the weather, as Chavez has claimed.

The Opposition: "Chavez, You've Struck Out"

13. (SBU) Tens of thousands of people also took part in the opposition-led march, displaying the colors and slogans of their respective opposition parties. Major opposition politicians such as Miranda Governor Henrique Capriles, Zulia Governor Pablo Perez,

Greater Caracas Mayor Antonio Ledezma, and Sucre Municipality Mayor Carlos Ocariz, took part in the march, which ended in the slum of Petare, where they emphasized the need to win seats in September's election. "Chavez, You've Struck Out," ("Chavez, 'tas ponchao") was a recurring banner, first unrolled at a playoffs baseball game in Caracas the previous week, where electricity, water, and crime were counted as the "three strikes" against Chavez. In general, the march focused attention on a range of issues, from freedom of expression to economics. According to press reports, both the National Guard and the Metropolitan Police were a positive presence at the march.

Comment:

14. (C) Both sides used the January 23 march to mobilize and perhaps even measure their supporters at the beginning of this election year. Unlike previous marches, the routes for the pro- and anti- government protesters were strictly separated, with marchers walking in opposite directions. The decision by the opposition to hold its rally in the poor barrio of Petare may be an indication that the opposition has recognized the need to appeal to the millions of poor Venezuelans if they hope to win in September. While recent social problems may have galvanized opposition protesters, the number of pro-Chavez supporters shows that he still has a loyal following and the ability to mobilize them.  
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